

CBPAs:

FAQs, ideas and encouragement for the music educator

By now most arts teachers in the state of Washington have at least heard the acronym CBPA, and many are aware of what it represents. But what do those letters really mean for you and your classroom?

by Nancie Linn Shaw



Classroom-Based Performance Assessments, or CBPAs are the arts equivalent of the WASL—and like the WASL, within two years they will be a required assessment tool in our classrooms. A peripheral view of the development process and a state workshop on scoring rubrics have helped me feel comfortable implementing CBPAs. This article can raise your comfort level as well, by addressing some of the questions and concerns that are likely to arise.

Let's start with the basics:

What?

CBPAs are assessments designed and piloted by arts educators for use in music, dance, theatre and visual arts classrooms. The essential difference between these tools and other assessment formats is that all of them are *performance-based*; i.e., rather than have our students take paper-and-pencil tests answering questions about music, they actually get to be tested on what they do in our classrooms on a regular basis.

In addition to being performance-based, the CBPAs are offered in a variety of options. Teachers can choose which assessments they wish to use. Though the prompts vary by age group, the basic formats involve composing a short melody; performing, either by preparing a chosen piece or sight reading; or responding in writing to a music sample. Empowering teachers to select the format that best suits their program is one of the CBPAs' greatest assets.

When?

CBPAs will be administered to all arts students in grades 5, 8 and 10. All Washington schools are required to implement the CBPAs by the 2008-2009 school year. I would advise everyone to administer at least one of the assessments prior to that requirement, so any problems you may encounter can be

solved in advance.

Where?

The assessments are administered within your classroom setting. If you have multi-graded classes, you have the option of administering the assessment to every student.

How?

A great deal of information about the CBPAs can be found at the OSPI website: www.k12.wa.us/CurriculumInstruct/Arts/default.aspx. In addition, I bookmarked the following page, which takes me directly to the assessment options: www.k12.wa.us/CurriculumInstruct/Arts/CBPAentireset.aspx.

Each assessment option contains a complete packet of information, including directions for administration, student task booklets and rubrics for scoring. It doesn't take long to browse through the choices, and the instructions are clear. Some assessments have examples of passing and exemplary student work (rubric scores of 3 and 4, called "limited sets"), while others contain examples of both passing and non-passing student work (rubric scores of 1-4, called "complete sets"). Perusing these examples is a good way to develop an understanding of the standards that have been set.

Why?

To give us another window into student achievement.

Many of us have performing tests, but the CBPAs allow us to measure student learning beyond scales or difficult passages from their repertoire. CBPAs that focus on composition or sightreading, for example, can let us know how well our students understand concepts of music theory or how well they process music notation.

To help us measure individual student learning.

When our groups perform, the audience—or adjudicator—hears the whole. But the whole is composed of individual parts, and the whole benefits when all the individuals are competent. CBPAs help us identify and assist students who need additional support, especially those who have satisfactory technique but need more competence in fundamentals of music.

To inform us about the results of our instruction.

What things are your students doing well? What are they not doing as well as you expected? When I piloted two different CBPAs, I was surprised that a few of my students didn't know what I thought they did. They played their instruments well, but there were gaps in their knowledge that I had not realized were there. The assessment results gave me valuable information about what was missing in my own instruction and, therefore, about ways I could become a better teacher.

To increase public perception of our legitimacy.

I have both heard and read opinions stating that since math and science are tested on the WASL and music is not, music classes should be moved outside the school day so classroom time can be devoted to “academic” instruction. Obviously the people who say

and write these things have no idea of the value, on so many levels, of arts education. Convincing them otherwise involves a great deal of advocacy—and the existence of a statewide assessment tool can help leverage the “it’s being tested so therefore it must be important” crowd.

Other considerations

Most of the concern about CBPAs involves the logistics of implementation. If a teacher selects a creating or responding format, the biggest concern may be that of grading time. That can be partially resolved by administering the test to everyone in the class, but only grading the students who are required to take it. Another possibility is to administer the assessment and then complete the scoring gradually, over an extended period of time. Remember, one of the huge benefits of the CBPA format is that each teacher has a great deal of autonomy in administering it.

Selecting a performing format carries additional complications. When individual students perform in a separate location, how will the rest of the class be monitored? And how much time will it take? Flexibility can be the key: for example, students could be assigned this task over a large span of time, so a solid week (or more) of class time isn’t used at once. If you have an office or practice room near your rehearsal room, student leaders could conduct the group while you record the individuals. An officially approved parent volunteer could monitor the group or monitor the recording. Ask a principal or counselor to take your class while you are recording your individual students—what better way for them to appreciate how complicated your job is? If your students are amenable, you could have them perform in a recital format, which you could simultaneously record and score. The bottom line is that *you are allowed to find ways to make the implementation work for you and your students.* (An added plus: by next spring, the WMEA website is planning to have a blog established, where teachers can post ideas they tried and solutions that worked for them. Sharing strategies will no doubt make implementation easier for everyone.)

When I was in school (so last-millennium), all we ever did in class was rehearse—and thankfully, those days are gone. I didn’t mind it at the time, but I left high school with little background in music theory, none in music history and without ever writing a note of my own music. We are now required by state EALRs to teach our students to create and respond as well as perform; I genuinely enjoy those activities in my classroom, and my students do, too. They like to compose, and they write heartfelt and eloquent passages about music; they are “whole” musicians. I make time for those activities in the school year, usually after major concerts; the students appreciate the change of pace, as well as the learning component. All the CBPAs do is put those activities in a measurable format.

The students learn and become better musicians; we learn and become better teachers. We add some time and logistical hassles to already full schedules, but we also add activities that are as fun as they are valuable. We choose the assessment that appeals to us the most, and we have flexibility in details of administration. As state assessments go, I can’t imagine it getting any better than that!

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